

# Relating for a Change

## A 1980s Micro-project Introducing Therapeutic Community Practice within a Prison

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### Abstract

This paper briefly introduces a 1980s Micro-project in Australia set-up by Therapeutic Community pioneer Dr Neville Yeomans exploring the starting of Therapeutic Community based psychotherapy practice within a Prison. Processes used in setting up this Micro-project are introduced as well as theoretical, practical, and clinical perspectives. It includes references to papers on precursors and outcomes. Yeomans' stacked and juxtaposed every micro-aspect of his Way with transforming possibilities. Maxwell Jones commenting on this wrote, 'given such a carefully worked-out structure, evolution is an inevitable consequence'. The Micro-project's mentor's successful entry into the prison population is outlined. Twelve sexual offenders invited to participate in the Micro-project checked with jail standover types and received the go-ahead. The paper details the framing assumptions set up by Yeomans which influenced the participant prisoners to draft a wise and potent behavioural contract governing the running of the group. Potent aspects that contributed to the Micro-project commencing and running effectively are specified. The Micro-project's positive affects throughout prison population are outlined including the *total* prison population joining the mini-project participants' in reaching consensus, and then preparing, signing, and submitting a wise influential submission to a state government inquiry into compassionate leave.

This paper introduces a 1980s Micro-project in Australia set-up by Therapeutic Community pioneer Dr Neville Yeomans exploring the starting of Therapeutic Community based psychotherapy practice within a Prison. It may inform start-ups of Therapeutic Community Units in Prisons and innovation in existing Prison TC Programs. It includes glimpses of underlying theoretical, practical, and clinical perspectives, and includes references to detailed specifying of precursors of these perspectives in the 1960s, and the outcomes of using evolving community as a form of transforming process. At the time of helping to set up this TC Micro-project, I was being mentored by Dr Neville Yeomans who is recognised as one of the early pioneers of TC along with Maxwell Jones and Harry Wilmer and others (Spencer, 2005b, Radio TC International, 2009). In 1959, Yeomans was the founder and first director of Fraser House Therapeutic Community in North Ryde, NSW, Australia (Spencer, 2005a; Spencer, 2013a). I first met Yeomans when he was co-facilitating a transformative use of sensory submodalities Workshop beside Sydney Harbour in 1985. During a chat over this Workshop lunch break he concluded that I may be the person he had been looking for since the mid 1960s to do a PhD on his life work. I did commence that PhD in 1998 and completed it in 2005. That 1985 lunchtime chat

started 15 years of mentoring by Yeomans and co-learning with him to his death in 2000 (Carroll, 2000).

For context, Yeomans' academic study included anthropology, biology, history, law, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, and sociology, alongside indigenous cultural healing artistry and futures studies. As theoretical background, Yeomans had been pioneering the use of social processes including community supported therapeutic use of life narrative in community psychiatry. This paper uses the life narrative form in resonance with Yeomans' Way (Spencer, 2005a; Spencer, 2013a).

Yeomans was aware of psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan's understandings relating to the formative significance of the network of relationships in which people are enmeshed (Sullivan, 1953). Sullivan developed a theory of psychiatry based upon interpersonal relationships where problematic cultural forces are deemed to be largely responsible for social illness and mental illness. With 'evolving relationships' as theme, the inherently unfinished and tentative relational knowing and the inter-subjective is the foci (the German 'Kennen') not the definitive form of knowing that aids prediction and control (the German 'Wissen') (Pelz, 1974' Pelz 1975). Sullivan's focus was on the 'interactional', not the 'intrapsychic'. Yeomans' processes in community psychiatry assumed a social onset of mental illness and relational social processes of a differing kind for transforming to psycho-social-emotional wellbeing. To an outsider, it may seem that Yeomans was engaging in naive simplicity. The seemingly simple was potent. Yeomans Way involved stacking and juxtaposing every micro aspect of structure and process with transforming possibilities. Maxwell Jones, a UK TC pioneer commenting on Yeomans Way wrote, 'given such a carefully worked-out structure, evolution is an inevitable consequence' (Clark and Yeomans, 1969, vi). Some examples, every aspect of the process and practical action was to be:

- contributing to evolving the size and richness of participants' networks
- Increasing agency
- Evolving the full spectrum of the self (example: self respect, self worth, self image, self confidence, self identity)
- Evolving and enriching social relating
- Increasing general and role specific stocks of culturally fitting knowledge and competences, and ways to use these competences that are functional in context (Spencer, 2017, p. 130-134)

Like Sullivan, Yeomans was evolving community psychiatry at three levels:

- Individual and community care,
- Prevention, and
- Social transforming

### **The Evolving of the TC Micro-project**

In 1988, a psychologist acquaintance of Yeomans wanted to receive mentoring in how to add group psychotherapy to her individual psychotherapy in Prison work towards the possibility of setting up a prison TC Unit in the future. She knew Yeomans as they had both studied psychology together, and she also knew that

Yeomans had been the founding director of the Fraser House Therapeutic Community where residents were received from prisons as well as psychiatric hospitals. She had asked Yeomans for the near impossible request - did he know a very competent mentor in group psychotherapy who would be prepared to volunteer to attend and support the jail psychologist evolve and implement a 16 month experimental program for sexual offenders based upon therapeutic community principles. Yeomans invited me to pioneer this small informal TC Micro-project in an Australian Prison. The Micro-project members would be still be mingling with the other prisoners in the cells and other areas, though together in a secure place whilst engaged in therapeutic community practice. This approximated Fraser House where most residents returned to their homes for the weekend and had to learn to cope back home. In the prison Micro-project the proposed participants would also have to learn to cope with their everyday circumstances among the wider jail population including fitting in and complying with staff.

I was very keen to increase my competences, I had arranged private funding. I could weave this voluntary work into my preparatory field research towards doing a PhD, and it would prepare me for engaging later with 'perpetrators' in SE Asia (Psychnet Report, 2004). As this would be an informal project agreed to by the Jail governor, and with me being a volunteer we would have considerable freedom to innovate. I agreed to participate. Yeomans agreed to mentor me and the jail psychologist for the sixteen months of the Project.

### **TC Micro-project Framing**

This proposed TC Micro-project was potentially going to be a secure enclave within the secure prison. The Governor required that a senior would be present in the space for security and be a non-participant observer reporting back to the Governor. The Governor could cancel the Micro-project at anytime. He left the processes to be used to be decided by the jail psychologist.

The jail psychologist had a series of planning sessions with Yeomans and I became involved in these. It was decided that all involved in the Micro-project could explore being in the process of changing all manner of integrated behavioural patterns from 'Jail mode' across to the 'TC Micro-project mode'.

Yeomans introduced a number of guiding principles and assumptions for this Micro Project - those that had worked well at Fraser House:

- Nothing would happen unless the Participants in the Micro-project wanted it to happen
- Participants in the Micro-project knew what was missing in their lives and they would have the say in what happens during our time together within an 'increasing individual and group wellbeing' framing
- 'Community' of a very particular kind would be the therapy; the jail psychologist and her mentor would be a resource person they could call upon
- Participants in the Micro-project would be getting on with their own change work of their own making. Nothing would be imposed

All of this framing was discussed with the prisoners individually in the jail psychologist therapy sessions and then the proposed participants were told of the others potentially involved and they were invited to discuss this endeavour with each other. In this they would all potentially increase their relating and cooperating with each other in exploring how they may begin being creators of their own reality within the confines of the prison.

## **Entry into the Prison Population**

Because of the layout and processes of the prison it would be inevitable that I would have some time mingling with the wider prison population and staff. Yeomans, the jail psychologist, and I discussed my entry into the prison system. At Yeomans' suggestion my first entry inside this prison and mingling with residents and staff was accompanying the jail psychologist and the Governor who introduced me to the total population at the same time during the midday meal. The Governor introduced me to residents and all staff - replicating Fraser House Big Group (Spencer, 2013a, p. 223-248). The Governor said I was a volunteer helping the jail psychologist for some months and that I would be having a discussion with one of the residents immediately after lunch. This resident was not going to be in the TC Micro-project. This manner of introduction was also teed up by Yeomans. The resident concerned was the most detested person in the prison. He was told to finish his meal and go with me and two officers to his cell.

The two officers waited outside the open door and out of sight. I was given an emergency buzzer I could press if I was at risk. I went in with him and within a few minutes he was sobbing for joy. Someone was setting aside his criminality and wanting to relate with him as a person - not as a loathsome thing. Many staff and prisoners saw that he came out with tears of appreciation. Some identified with him for the first time. 'I too want to be treated as more than a thing'. Even a person who described himself as 'a nobody from nowhere' sensed this as significant. 'We're all people'. This was the icebreaker. I was seen as different; a breath of fresh air.

On my first day, on three separate occasions I had a thorough briefing by prison heavies:

This is how this place works. We want no trouble. In here we do it easy! Do these things and don't do these other things and you won't have trouble and your trouble will not cause us trouble. Okay?

From this start I sensed that there was amongst the residents a well-evolved sub-culture that officialdom did not see or appreciate. This sub-culture served the residents well. At the heart of this culture was self interest in mutual care. Linked to this was an oft repeated mantra- 'here you either do it easy or do it hard'. This was linked to what could be termed 'positive renunciation' – where you rise above what you renounce. They never used this term. It was expressed as acceptance:

Keep your focus where you are - here inside prison. Live here and don't continually want to be on the outside. Do this and it becomes easier. If you keep focusing on life outside the prison and wanting to be outside, you do it hard. Minutes before an outside phone call have your focus on the outside

world and shift to being fully present in the outside. Then when the call is finished, switch focus and live in the moment - being fully present inside this prison and making the most of it.

Allied with this I noted that in a completely self-organising way new arrivals would be briefed about 'how this place works'. The foregoing are glimpses of a well-evolved sub-culture embracing exercising their own agency in maintaining social relating sustaining a quality of life, and this within an official system that systematically sets out to strip the prisoners of agency (Goffman, 1961; Spencer, 2013a. Appendix 5).

### **Forming the TC Micro-Project Group**

There were two types of prisoners that made up most in this facility - sexual offenders and drug offenders. Both groups would be at severe risk in other jails. Neither group liked the others. The jail heavies were typically drug contract-killer types. Twelve residents who were inside for sexual offences were invited to participate in group psychotherapy three times a week for 90 minutes in the evening. All of these invitees were receiving individual psychotherapy from the jail psychologist. As a group they checked with jail standover types as to what they thought about whether it was okay to attend and they received the go ahead.

If you can get parole earlier on less onerous conditions, then go for it.

As a group they decided to proceed. We held the group in a locked secure indoor basketball court within the prison precinct with a senior present in the far corner for security. The participants had requested a large writing pad on an easel and some marker pens and we had that ready. When we all had arrived they requested that before they made a final agreement to participate they had collectively decided to explore in our presence and between themselves whether they could compose and agree upon a set of clauses in a behavioural contract. This they did, though none had ever done anything like this before. We had in no way hinted at anything like this. Unaided they evolved and all agreed on using the following contract:

- We only use themes that we residents come up with and consensually agree upon
- A theme is to stop if any resident requests it
- Nothing about anyone's criminality or outside life is to be mentioned (the basis of their thinking – 'today's friend is tomorrow's enemy')
- What comes up in the group stays in the group
- The jail psychologist and her mentor have to sign the contract as well
- If you sign, be very serious about your commitment as if anyone withdraws from the group (unless they are leaving the prison) the whole group ceases completely. You leave the group and lots of others will be very angry that they are not having it continue.

This last clause powerfully sets up the certainty of massive withdrawal consequences. This recognising that 'actions have consequences' is in the context that all of these participants had completely failed to recognise that actions have consequences in committing the acts that put them in jail. During the rollout of this Project it became very apparent that all of these participants had little or no sense of when they were in personal danger. (Later they choose the theme of 'recognising personal danger' as one of their themes).

The prisoner participants drafted this contract unaided! All signed the contract and no one left the group. Already the participants have entered into the frame (Goffman, 1974) that we had outlined as well as entering aspects of the 'Micro-project' mode (in contrast to the 'Jail Mode') and we have only been going 35 minutes!

- Participants are cooperating and relating well with each other;
- They have an enhancing awareness of context and changes in context and are being guided by context
- They have commenced networking with each other both inside and outside the TC Group meeting
- They have been taking steps ensuring nothing happens unless participants want it to happen and mutually agree that it happens
- Participants are identifying with what is missing in their lives and taking their own action to be able, with support of their choosing, to experience what is missing
- Every aspect of the processes that they are evolving is contributing to expanding and enriching the participants' networking
- They are tapping into their own and their collective potentials and beginning to realise that the wisdom is in the group – together we can do things that we would have little chance of doing alone
- They are engaging in peer to peer mutual support
- They are already underway in:
  - evolving processes and practical action increasing their agency – their sense of and experience of 'can do' and 'can do well'
  - They were sensing themselves and as a small collective as different – sensing each other as the type of person that differed from the typical types of prisoners – we reciprocate in doing this and they do not – we choose what we do and how we do it and we engage in acts guided by norms of our own making
  - evolving the full spectrum of their self; examples - evolving and enriching:
    - self identity
    - self worth
    - self respect
    - self image, and
    - self confidence
- Evaluating is a pervasively imbedded aspect; participants are evaluating outcomes from moment-to-moment

- They are relationally acquiring practical ways of increasing their general and role-specific stock of culturally fitting knowledge and competences, and ways to use these competences that are functionally fitting in context
- This is their group wherein they have the say as to what happens
- They have us as resource people on their terms, and where they receive from us what they collectively agree and while we may suggest roles and processes, it is they that are doing the doing; the community is the therapy in the therapeutic community
- They are highly valuing and recognising that this process of their own making and sustaining is of very high value
- And all of this is happening 'on the fly' without them having much if any awareness of the aspects mentioned in this list as they are fully immersed in the flow of relational engaging. They have little insight. They just know it all feels right and that they are very keen to continue involvement.

The Jail Psychologist and I were both extremely pleased with this start. From the outset, the prospective participants were told that if this gets under way, together we would be creating and sustaining a protected enclave wherein we could all explore discovering each other and more fully discovering our self in the process of discovering possibilities for living lives well together; where we could explore relating well and be exploring our potentials. They had all taken this opportunity and ran with it.

Typically, the kinds of behaviours listed above are curtailed by the traditional prison system. Nothing that we are doing is undermining these participants' complying with the wider prison protocols. The participants seem to be very aware that this framing within the Micro-project applies strictly and only within the TC enclave; the wider prison protocols are so massively ongoingly oppressive. Outside of this enclave, the system exercises almost total control of what and when they can and cannot do things. The above framing within the Micro-project will also tend to inform the prisoners' covert protocol about 'how this place works' discussed above. It also holds promise to subtly influence the wellbeing of the wider prison population and even the staff. The various seniors attending the Group as non-participant observers will potentially be subtly influenced by osmosis.

The details of themes chosen by the participants and some of the outcomes during the sixteen months have been written up (Spencer, 2005a; Spencer, 2005b; Spencer, 2013a; Spencer, 2013b; Spencer, 2017; Spencer, 2019).

### **Involving the Total Resident Population**

After a time the changes in these twelve participants began to have ripple-through affects on the balance of the prison population as well as a discernible softening of the prison officers. A situation occurred that evolved an opportunity to involve all of the residents in practical wisdom. There were two instances where prisoners from other jails had reoffended while on compassionate leave. A major newspaper ran a series of articles pushing to ban all compassionate leave. The state government decided to appoint a retired Supreme Court judge to conduct a public inquiry and called for written submissions. This was raised in the Micro-project group and they decided to collaborate jointly in preparing and putting in a submission to the inquiry.

The participants began to involve other prisoners not in the Micro-project Group in preparing the submission and it took shape as a succinct half page statement with a number of personal stories (micro life narratives) as attachments. With encouragement from other prisoners, the person who had called himself a 'nobody from nowhere' wrote one of these attached life stories. Various drafts were made and ideas combined. With the Micro-project Participants and then the other prisoners seeking permission from the Governor, the draft was posted on the wall in the dining area ,and after a time, every resident in the prison became involved - sexual as well as drug offenders. The final submission was signed by EVERY resident including the most detested person. It was a very compelling case for compassionate leave with safeguards, and making the case that this continuance of compassionate leave was in everyone in society's best interests.

Having every prisoner sign as a unanimous community was all the more significant given the typical disdain that the drug offenders and the sexual offenders showed to each other. The Supreme Court judge made our prison the very first place to visit in his hearings. He stated that a unanimous submission was unique. He met the people who had written their stories as attachments. The Judge asked to speak to the person signing 'the nobody from nowhere' first. His final recommendations to the State government - to continue compassionate leave with safeguards - had all of our group's words woven throughout his report. His report was read by one of the Micro-project participants to the whole prison community during the midday meal and every time some words from the prisoners' submission were read out, the audience would applaud and cheer. The Governor knew the Judge's Report was going to be read out so he attended that muster and stayed for the reading. Afterwards he spoke privately to the jail psychologist and said, '

Slow down a bit. This place is supposed to be unpleasant. You're turning it into a holiday camp.

He said this with a smile on his face.

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